

HOW “ESCHATOLOGY AND MANNERS” *Came to Be Written*

BY MALCOLM BULL

In 1985, Keith Lockhart and I had recently got a contract from Harper & Row to write the book that became *Seeking a Sanctuary*. We were both extremely young and had no track record whatsoever, so we were very lucky to sell the idea. The commissioning editor was Clayton Carlson, who had been involved in Ron Numbers’s *The Prophetess of Health*, and must have hoped that our book would have a similar impact, which it didn’t.

On the strength of our small advance, we spent the summer of 1985 traveling around the United States doing interviews and gathering materials wherever we went, but at the time we had written nothing save for the three hastily concocted sample chapters for the publisher (all subsequently discarded). We needed time to reflect on

what we were doing, and an invitation from the Oxford sociologist Bryan Wilson provided the opportunity. He ran a weekly seminar in the sociology of religion at All Souls College, at which visiting academics and Oxford doctoral students presented their research in progress. I had participated in the seminar as an undergraduate and, although I had no ongoing affiliation with the university, Wilson continued to allow me to attend and suggested that we might like to give a presentation based on our research. Early in 1986, I wrote and presented the paper and in the discussion that followed both Keith and I fielded questions about the project as a whole.

Wilson had himself once planned to write a book on Seventh-day Adventism, but was said to have abandoned

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the idea after his notes were destroyed in a flood. It was maybe on this account that he took an interest in what we were doing, acting as an informal mentor to our project throughout. Wilson had written extensively on millenarianism and on charisma, and “Eschatology and Manners” reflects those preoccupations. But it was perhaps Wilson’s personality that shaped the text more profoundly. He considered good manners to be the essence of social interaction and he was always notably formal. There was nothing pretentious about this, and it probably owed more to his upper-working-class upbringing in Leeds where, as he later recalled, “We were a better class working-class family than the pump boys—they were rough; we weren’t rough,” than to the elaborate refinements of All Souls, at the time one of the most traditional of the Oxford colleges.

I suspected that a paper on manners might appeal to Wilson, but there were also ideas I could draw on from within recent historical scholarship. I had been reading Norbert Elias’s *The Civilizing Process* on the role of court etiquette in the development of self-restraint in early modern Europe at the same time as Michel Foucault’s work on the gaze in *The Birth of the Clinic* and *Discipline and Punish*. This conjunction led me to think about the function of the gaze in promoting self-awareness and self-discipline. Although *Spectrum* had yet to publish the transcript of the trial of Israel Dammon, Ron Graybill’s PhD thesis of 1983 had already revealed that early Adventist worship had a raucous, unrestrained quality quite alien to later practice. I began to wonder whether Adventism, once quite rough around the edges, had undergone its own civilizing process, inspired by the heavenly court of Ellen White’s visions, and mediated by the angelic gaze.

In that form, the argument might have been accommodated within traditional accounts of the routinization of charisma developed by Weber and indeed Wilson himself. But that did not seem to do justice to the evidence we were gathering. Adventism just did

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not fit existing sociological categories all that comfortably. Rather than being a religious community that had once undergone the civilizing process, perhaps Adventism was a civilizing process, repeatedly civilizing new generations of converts and new outsider communities as it spread throughout the world. And it was this idea, first adumbrated in “Eschatology and Manners,” that was later developed in *Seeking a Sanctuary*.

Although Wilson considered the paper “not quite in the genre of the sociology of religion,” he thought it might be publishable, and suggested I send it to the journal where he had published his first article, the *Archives de sciences sociales des religions*, edited in Paris by Jean Séguy. Although the article now seems to me to be itself a little rough around the edges, it was published more or less as it stood. Sadly, almost no one appears to have

read it from that day to this. But at the time, that was less discouraging than it might have been because Keith and I were in constant dialogue with a remarkable group of scholars at Newbold College, which was where Keith was teaching part-time, and where we did most of our research: Michael Pearson (who had himself been Wilson’s DPhil student at Oxford), Harry Leonard, and of our own generation, Julian Lethbridge and Kenneth Newport (later the author of the definitive study of the Branch Davidians). Sustained by their support, and often chastened by their skepticism, Keith and I went on with the project.

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